Bluebeard

There was once a proud and foolish widow who had two daughters, Anne and Fatima. Anne was short and dark and plain; but she had a brave heart and sharp wits. Fatima was fair and slim, with long pale-gold hair; and all she thought of was fine clothes and dainty things to eat. And her mother's one hope and desire was that Fatima should get a rich husband.

"When Fatima is married," she would say to Anne, "we will look for a husband for you too. But that will be a far harder thing to manage. And I am sure you will not envy your sister even if you never get married at all."

Anne smiled to herself at this, for she thought, "If ever *I* marry, it's my husband will have to do the 'looking.'" But she held her tongue.

Now one day there came to this rich widow's house a stranger in a fine glass coach with four milk-white horses. The night was growing dark when he reached its gates, but he could see its high gateposts and the lights in its windows, and he sat looking at it a moment and stroking his beard. Then he sent a footman to the lady of the house, bidding him ask the way. At sight of the foot-

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man and the fine silver-lamped coach, the widow at once invited the stranger in.

He bowed low over her hand, thanked her a thousand times, and explained that his coachman had lost his way and now night was down.

"He shall be punished, madam, all in good time," he said, looking at her as an old fat barn-door cock looks at a grain of barley. "But meanwhile would you be so kind as to tell me what road to take now, to the nearest inn?"

This silly widow, seeing his handsome clothes, and thinking what pleasant manners he had, for he bowed and smirked at every word he uttered, thought to herself, "Ah, here at last is the very husband I have been hoping for, for my dear dear Fatima."

There was but one thing about him that made her doubt a little. He had a long hooked nose between his little bright black eyes, and a blue beard. It was a blue beard so dark as to be almost black, and of the shape of a shovel, and he stroked it as he spoke to her—a strange beard! When he saw Fatima, he cast up his little eyes as if in astonishment at her beauty, and smiled and bowed again and kissed her hand. And the lady smiled, too. "Ah," she thought, "he has already fallen in love. And no wonder!"

The fair Fatima listened to his pretty speeches and drank in his flatteries as she sat beside him at supper, crumbling her bread and sipping her wine. And Bluebeard—for that was the name by which he was known to his neighbours—vowed to her mother that in his long life he had never set eyes on so fair and modest a damsel as her daughter, and the very next evening he asked for Fatima's hand in marriage. Her mother could scarcely contain herself for joy.

A few days afterwards—for Bluebeard said he must make no great stay from his own estate—there was a splendid wedding,

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with guests from far and near, and Anne was Fatima's bridesmaid. And after the wedding there was a Feast. There were fiddlers and trumpeters, and silver gilt dishes loaded with rich dainties and sweetmeats, and Bluebeard smirked and twiddled the great ring on his thumb, and the eating and drinking lasted till morning. The widow's only regret was that her two sons were not sharing in these joys, for they were away in foreign parts.

The next day Bluebeard led his bride to his coach; they waved their hands out of the window, and the coach rolled away. Besides the bags and chests full of Fatima's clothes in the cart that went with them, there was another great chest slung on to the back of the coach itself, and that held her dowry.

After some days' journey, for the huge heavy coach rolled on very slowly through the country ruts and rain, Bluebeard lifted his head and bade Fatima look out of the window. She did so, and on a little hill, rising above the green flat country round about it, she saw a vast dark mansion with turrets of stone.

"See, my dear, that is where you are going to live," he said. But though the house with its stone walls and turrets was a fine thing to look at, rising in solitude on its green hill, Fatima could not help shivering, it looked so grim and forbidding. But she smiled at her husband, and he stroked his beard and watched the windows of the house as he drew near.

Now it seemed strange to Fatima that there was not a single soul to welcome them. But she soon found out that the country people hated Bluebeard, and refused even to sell him their butter and eggs and pigs and fowls, though to curry favour with them he had often tried to buy. When he came into sight the children ran and hid themselves, and every door was shut. Besides which, Bluebeard seemed to have no friends at all and not even a single visitor was ever seen at his gates. When she was alone—which

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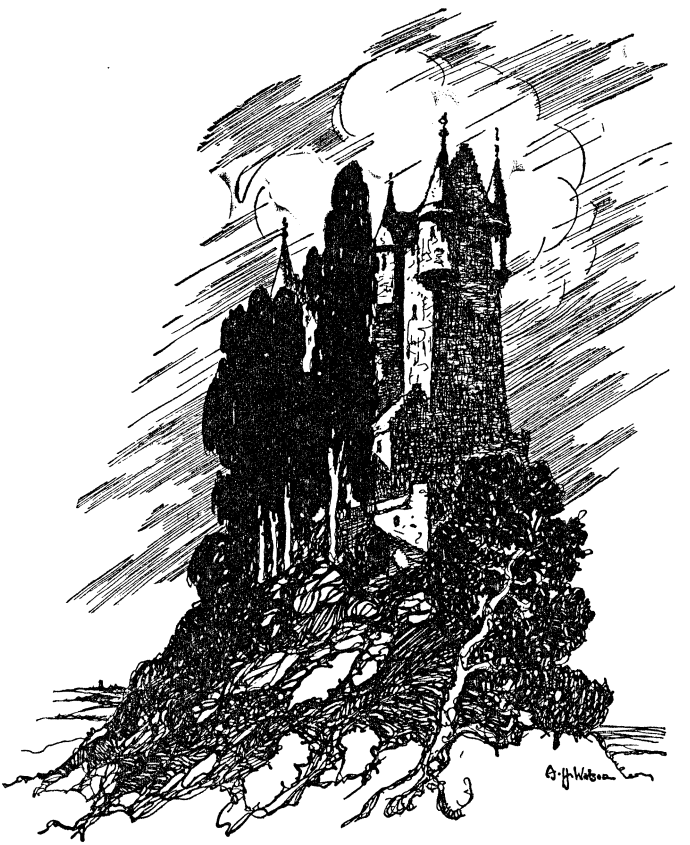

Bluebeard's Castle.

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was often—Fatima wondered why this should be. But she did not dare ask questions. For Bluebeard was often moody and silent, and she was sometimes so unhappy she wished she was home again.

Now one evening, as she was walking along the bank of a little river that looped its way through the green fields beneath the walls of Bluebeard's house on the hill, Fatima met an old woman gathering sticks. Fatima was feeling sad and doleful because she saw so little of her husband and because she was homesick; and though she had never done such a thing before, she stooped down and picked up one of the sticks that the old woman had dropped by chance out of her heavy faggot.

The old woman looked at her, muttered a blessing for her kindness, and then, after a swift searching glance at the house, whispered in her ear, "Where one is now, there once were many. Beware!"

But before Fatima could ask her what she meant by this queer secret saying, the old woman had hobbled off with her sticks.

A day or two after this, Bluebeard, as they sat at supper, told Fatima that early the next week he would be going on a journey to see a rich cousin of his. "And his name, my dear, is—what do you think?" He laughed aloud as he said it: "Why, Redbeard! Now, while I am away everything will be in your charge. Yours only, my poppet. And here are the keys."

Saying this, he drew out of his pouch a great jangling bunch of keys, large and small, and laid them on the table beside her plate. Then, one by one, he told Fatima which key was for which room, until he came to the last, "And *this* little key, my dear—*this* little key is for the room at the end of the stone corridor that leads to the tower. Never stray in that direction. Don't go down there. It's cold; and there are draughts and rats. And on no account open the door at the end of the passage. That is a secret room. No eye looks into it, no foot crosses it but my own. My own," he repeated, stroking his blue beard, and looking at her down his long hooked nose

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out of his beady black eyes. "And I am sure if you do not do as I bid you about this room, you will agree that I should have good reason for being unutterably angry."

As he said that word *unutterably*, his eyes fairly sparkled in his head, and his beard seemed to bristle like the fur of a cat at sight of a dog. And seeing this, Fatima grew pale and trembled.

"There, there, pretty poppet!" he said, patting her hand as it lay on the table, "so long as you do what I tell you, no harm can come. I shall be home again in a few days."

By noon on the Tuesday he had set out in his coach, and Fatima waved a shawl from a window until he was out of sight. But days before he had gone, Fatima had sent a message to her sister Anne, entreating her to come and stay with her until Bluebeard returned. For she could not abide the thought of being alone in the house.

The next day, with Bluebeard's great bunch of keys in her hand, Fatima took Anne from room to room and showed her all the splendours of his house. In some of the great rooms there were chairs and tables of solid silver, with curtains of crimson velvet, and glass candelabra full of candles, and mirrors on the marble walls. In one much smaller room was a cage made of gold wires and cedar-wood, and it was filled with singing birds of gold and silver with gems for eyes; and these birds sang when Fatima touched a secret spring. In other rooms was only emptiness—only the light from the windows, and dust and spiders' webs. One of the upper rooms, too, the very last they visited, contained nothing but an immense wardrobe of ebony, its shelves and hooks crammed with bonnets and gowns and furs and feathers and silk pelisses and petticoats and all kinds of finery.

"How strange," cried Anne at sight of these, "that such an old bachelor as Bluebeard was before you married him should have all these fine females' clothes!"

"I expect," said Fatima, "they belonged to his sisters."

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"I wonder," said Anne.

So they went away from that room and down the wide staircase together. And Anne said, "So now we have seen everything?" But to this Fatima replied nothing, for, though she was pining and pining merely to peep into the little room at the end of the stone passage, she made no mention to her sister of the last little key of all, because she was afraid that Anne would think Bluebeard mistrusted her.

So time went on, until it came to the middle of the third night after Bluebeard had gone away. Then Fatima could bear herself no longer. She had not slept a wink for thinking of the secret room, and at last she rose up out of her bed, lit the candle in her silver candlestick, muffled herself up in a night-gown, and with the bunch of keys in her hand, crept downstairs and so came to the forbidden stone corridor. And as she hastened along with her light she could hear a wild scampering and scurrying; and the air was bitter cold and still in the passage. With one last glance over her shoulder, Fatima put the key into the lock and opened the door.

Its hinges were rusty, and as she opened it they made a dismal screeching noise, and Fatima's heart, at sound of it, stood still with terror. Yet when she looked into the room there was at first sight nothing to see—nothing but another heap of clothes, some old leather trunks, and an immense cupboard. For a while Fatima forgot her fears, and was bitterly disappointed.

Then, still greedy with curiosity, and with her candle in her hand, she stole over to the cupboard and opened the door. And, alas! what a sight met her eyes! She uttered a scream; the keys dropped from her hand; she almost swooned away. For there, hanging in a row, were what she knew at once must be Bluebeard's dead past wives, before she herself had become the last of them. And *now* Fatima realised where all those fine females' clothes had come from.

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There Anne found her, for she had heard her cry, and the two sisters went back to Fatima's bedroom; but Fatima was so much terrified she could scarcely breathe or speak. At last Anne made her promise to say nothing to Bluebeard about the room when he returned; and she herself, even though it was not yet near daybreak, at once sent a messenger galloping off to their mother's house to bring back in all haste their two brothers, who had but just returned from foreign parts. The rest of the night Anne spent with her sister Fatima, lying beside her in her bed, and trying in vain to make her warm again.

The first thing in the morning Fatima looked at the keys, and found, to her horror, that some of them had thick black stains upon them. She rubbed and scrubbed and polished away at them all that morning, but though she managed to get most of them perfectly clean, try as she might, she could not get one little black speck out of the key of the secret room, nor even could Anne either, though she had much stronger fingers and could rub far harder.

About noon two or three days afterwards, Fatima, watching out of the window, saw her husband's coach far away to the East, lumbering along like a great creeping insect over the country road. At this she ran hastily downstairs to her sister. "Alas, alas, Anne! He comes!" she said. When Bluebeard entered into the house, he kissed her on both cheeks, and she trembled.

Then he looked at her, and said, "Well, poppet, and where are the keys?"

So Fatima brought Bluebeard his great bunch of keys.

"Ah, ah!" says he, smiling, "what a busy wife have we! Eh? How prettily they shine!" Then again he looked at her with his little eyes and said:

"But what is this wee, wee little black speck, Fatima, on the key of the secret room?"

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Fatima could make no answer; she could only stare at him, quaking all over.

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But Fatima could make no answer; she could only stare at him, quaking all over. At this silence, and seeing her with head hung down and trembling hands, Bluebeard's face blackened like a storm at sea. His blue beard seemed to bristle, and his eyes to sparkle.

"Ha!" he said. "I see you have disobeyed me, Fatima. I see you have discovered what happens to a wife who does what she is told *not* to do. Come with me, maybe we shall find room for you, too, in the secret chamber!" Then, in spite of her cries and lamentations, he at once dragged her out of the room and along the stone corridor. But there was one thing of which this wretch was not aware—that Fatima's sister Anne was in the house, and was now hidden in a little stone closet above the secret room, and was gazing out of its window in watch for her two brothers.

On the threshold of the room, Fatima fell upon her knees before Bluebeard, and, with tears raining from her eyes, entreated him. "Oh, my dear husband, mercy!" she said. "Give me but a little time in which to say a prayer before I die."

Bluebeard looked at her, and said, "Well, it must be short and quick. Seven minutes shall be yours; then hope no more. I will wait at the end of the corridor."

When he had gone back to the end of the stone corridor, leaving her alone, Fatima slipped into the room and almost for the first time in her life showed that she had some sense in her vain, silly head. For, once inside the room, she drew the bolt softly but swiftly, and so locked the door. And she called, "Sister Anne, Sister Anne, it is death in a moment. What do you see?"

And Sister Anne, looking out over the western road towards the setting sun, whispered, "Only an empty road, Fatima. No sign yet."

And Fatima in a little time cried again, "Sister Anne, Sister Anne, what do you see now?"

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"I see a cloud of dust on the road," said Anne.

"Ah, they come, they come!" cried Fatima.

"No," answered Anne at last, "it is nothing but a flock of silly sheep, and the sun on their fleeces and the dust rising over them."

And Fatima in a little while cried again, "Sister Anne, Sister Anne, what do you see *now*?"

"I see dust again and a glinting—but oh, alas, Fatima, it is only the huntsmen with the hounds, and their hunting-horns shining."

By this time Bluebeard had heard Fatima's voice as she talked with her sister Anne, and his hand was upon the door. When he found it was locked and barred against him, his rage passed all bounds. He beat upon the door, until the bolt within began to strain and bend and buckle in its socket.

"Oh, Sister Anne, Sister Anne, what do you see *now*?" cried Fatima.

"I see horsemen," whispered Anne.

"Horsemen?"

"Ay, Fatima, horsemen—galloping! It is our brothers. They come, they come!"

With that she ran down the little flight of stone steps and clasped Fatima in her arms.

At this moment, after a last great wrench, the hasp of the door flew off, and there stood Bluebeard in his fury, in a sky-blue mantle, a great scimitar in his hand.

But hardly had he taken a step into the room when Fatima's two brothers came leaping down the corridor in pursuit of him, and in a moment or two his dead body lay stretched out upon the floor. So they buried his poor wives; and Fatima with her money went to live with her sister Anne. But the house upon the hill stood empty and vacant until at length it fell into ruin, desolation and decay.

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